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SUBJECT: DEATH OF HONG KONG DAB CHAIRMAN MA LIK

REF: HONG KONG 01511

Classified By: Acting Consul General Chris Marut; Reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: Ma Lik, Legislative Councilor and Chairman of the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), died on August 8 in a Guangzhou hospital at age 55. His passing creates vacancies in both the Legislative Council (Legco) and the DAB leadership that will be strongly contested and for which there are no obvious successors. The most likely candidates for his Legco seat are Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor Chair and District Councilor Cyd Ho and former Secretary for Security Regina Ip, both of whom have been widely expected to run for the Legco in 2008. Many will view a by-election contest, probably within the next three months, between the liberal democrat Ho and the pro-government Ip as a referendum on the future course of universal suffrage and political reform in Hong Kong. Within the DAB, none of the four current vice chairmen has a clear edge to succeed Ma. End Summary.

12. (C) Ma Lik, Legislative Councilor and Chairman of the DAB, died at 2:00 pm August 8 in a Guangzhou hospital. Earlier the same day, various papers had reported that Ma was in critical condition. Diagnosed with colon cancer in 2004, Ma reportedly had recovered following surgery in Guangzhou, although he regularly returned there for post-operative treatment. Recently, following his controversial remarks about the June 1989 Tiananmen crackdown (ref), Ma had been absent from Hong Kong, prompting speculation either that his health had deteriorated or that he was avoiding media attention. During an August 3 lunch, several of Ma's DAB colleagues told us that he remained in a Guangzhou hospital but that his condition was improving. Press reports this morning revealed that Ma was comatose and his prognosis was "not optimistic." A DAB contact confirmed this morning that the media reports were accurate and that "short of a miracle" Ma would not survive much longer.

13. (C) The DAB is Hong Kong's largest political party, with over 10,000 members, and generally supports policy positions favored by the Hong Kong and central governments. With the start of Chief Executive Donald Tsang's new term on July 1, many observers believed that the DAB's influence on policy would increase, particularly through the appointments of Tsang Tak-shing as Secretary for Home Affairs and more

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recently Shiu Sin-por (who, while not a DAB member, is strongly pro-Beijing) as a member of the Central Policy Unit. The death of Ma probably will not affect this trend, as party stalwarts Jasper Tsang and Maria Tam generally were more active and influential on policy issues than Ma.

¶4. (C) Ma's death creates vacancies and competitions for both his Legco seat and his DAB chairmanship. In Legco, Ma represented a geographic (directly elected) constituency on Hong Kong Island. According to the Hong Kong Legislative Council Ordinance, the Electoral Affairs Commission must arrange for a by-election to fill Ma's seat, but the law does not specify a timeframe. A similar situation occurred when a legislator resigned in 2000, and the by-election was held within three months. Initial press speculation suggests that the most likely candidates are Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor Chair and District Councilor Cyd Ho, who narrowly lost her seat in the 2004 Legco elections and has told us she intends to run in 2008, and former Secretary for Security Regina Ip, who also is widely believed to be a candidate for Legco in ¶2008. Given the prominence of both Ho and Ip, as well as Ma's recent controversial remarks, many would view a by-election contest between the liberal democrat Ho and the pro-government Ip as a referendum on the future course of universal suffrage and political reform in Hong Kong. Both the DAB and the pan-democratic parties will work hard to mobilize their supporters for the election campaign.

¶5. (C) Within the DAB, the likely succession process is less clear. There are four vice chairmen, none of whom are obvious front-runners: Legco members Tam Yiu-chung and Lau Kong-wah, former Legco member Ip Kwok-him, and Greg So Kam-leung (who recently replaced NPC Deputy Maria Tam as vice chairman). Tam Yiu-chung is the most senior of the four, but his strong Federation of Trade Unions connections and lack of fluency in English may conflict with the party's attempts to attract relatively younger and more professional members. Lau, while meeting those needs, may be hampered by his past association with the United Democrats, the precursor of the Democratic Party. Some of the DAB's more left-wing members continue to regard him with suspicion. Ip, like Tam, is not fluent in English, but may be more seriously hampered by the

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fact that he lost a 2003 District Council race against Cyd Ho. Ip could strengthen his position with a strong performance in the November District Council elections. Finally, So is intelligent and articulate, but he probably is too young (48), too "foreign" (he holds a Canadian passport), and too inexperienced within the party; he also lacks close connections with Beijing. One way out of this dilemma would be for the party to convince former chairman Jasper Tsang to resume the position he left in 2003, but at this time we do not know if Tsang would be interested in doing so.
Marut